

SANE INSANITY: WOMEN AND ASCETICISM IN LATE ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

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I *Women, Madness, and Sōphrosynē in Classical Antiquity*

Given the ancient overdetermination of femaleness as unstable and as susceptible to demonic invasion—an overdetermination in which philosophy, medicine, law, drama, and poetry conspired—it is not surprising that women ascetics of the early Christian era were deemed by their critics to be especially prone to irrationality and hence in need of attentive regulation. Yet, I shall suggest, these women ascetics (at least as represented by the male authors whose writings constitute our evidence) turned these suspicions of madness to the defense of their own ascetic theory and practice. To be sure, revised understandings of female physiology and legal capacity in late antiquity may indirectly have assisted their argument. Although considered unstable and in need of guardianship by those hostile to their renunciatory endeavor, such women and their advocates recast their alleged “insanity” as a supreme form of sanity—according to the presuppositions of their ascetic ideology.

Sane men in ancient Greek society could be characterized as *sō-phrōn*, “having a safe (*sōs*) *phrēn*, the latter understood as the organ of thought and perception.¹ Although women too were exhorted to exhibit *sōphrosynē*, for them the virtue connoted modesty, chastity, obedience, and public invisibility.² (Aristotle explained this discrepancy of connotation by alleging that in women, the deliberative faculty was weak.)³ If men’s *phrēn* or *phrenes* became darkened or damaged, they might exhibit signs of madness, akin to the dark, ominous, and maddening quality of women’s bodies and lives.⁴ Since the minds of

¹ Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 20–21, 23; also see Ruth Padel, “Madness in Fifth-century (B.C.) Athenian Tragedy,” in *Indigenous Psychologies: The Anthropology of the Self*, edd. Paul Helas and Andrew Lock (London: Academic Press, 1981), p. 107.

² See references to various primary source texts elaborating these feminine virtues in Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges From the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 187, 194–96.

³ Aristotle, *Politics* 1259b–1260a.

⁴ Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, pp. 113, 161; cf. Bennett Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient*

females were deemed more penetrable by outside forces and less able to keep to a steady course, women could be subject to terrifyingly violent passion: Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon stood as case-in-point.⁵ It was, of course, men who created and used such myths of women's insanity as threatening to the stable order of the family and society.⁶

Some forms of madness were assigned to natural causes: thus physicians favored the explanation that insanity was brought on by an excess of black bile,⁷ and Herodotus attributes Cleomenes' madness to his excessive drinking.⁸ Conversely, Galen, commenting on Book 6 of the *Epidemics* in the Hippocratic corpus, notes cases where mental perturbation brought on physical illness and even death.⁹ In both of these cases, nonetheless, the functions of body and mind are seen as interactive. More interesting for our purposes, however, are the divinely-inspired types of madness which (according to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*) provide our greatest blessings.¹⁰ Socrates elaborates: prophetic madness is inspired by Apollo; ritual madness by Dionysus; poetic madness by the Muses; and erotic madness by Aphrodite and Eros.¹¹ The mad person is here seen as a victim (albeit often a happy one) of divine invasion.¹² Women's greater "penetrability," it was thought, made them more susceptible to divine inspiration¹³—although we might infer from the extant poetic remains that the Muses did not select female "victims" very often.

That women were more penetrable and hence more susceptible to divine invasion than men was a view reinforced by ancient physiology and medi-

Greece: *The Classical Roots of Modern Psychiatry* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 92: for Plato and the tragedians, a typical antonym for madness is *sôphrosynê*.

⁵ Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 597-601, discussed in Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, p. 110.

⁶ Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, edd. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (London/Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 8.

⁷ For discussion of the many medical sources attributing madness to an excess of bile, see Ainsworth O'Brien-Moore, *Madness in Ancient Literature*. Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1922 (Weimar: R. Wagner Sohn, 1924), pp. 21-36. Imbalance of the humors or disturbance of the *pneumata* were usually thought to be the causes of mental disorder: see Michael Dols, "Insanity in Byzantine and Islamic Medicine," in *Symposium on Byzantine Medicine*, ed. John Scarborough. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985), p. 138.

⁸ Herodotus 6.84. For an interesting later case of an entire city's going "mad" due to dreadful disruptions of the social and natural order, see the account by Susan Ashbrook (Harvey) of "insanity" in Amida in the year 560: "Asceticism in Adversity: An Early Byzantine Experience," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 6 (1980): 3-4.

⁹ Vivian Nutton, "Galen on the Stress of Living," paper presented at a seminar on "Sanity, Illness and Quality of Life in the Ancient World," Copenhagen, May 22, 1997. Nutton stressed Galen's concern that health of the mind must be attended to as well as health of the body; thus the lovesick need distraction. *Epidemics* 6 is available only in a ninth-century Arabic translation; the content of the work, however, can be ascertained from Galen's *Commentary*.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus* 244A.

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 265B.

¹² Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, pp. 110-11.

¹³ Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, p. 110.

cine. It was not only that women's bodies bore an "extra" orifice and hence were more "open," but that their very flesh was more porous and spongy than men's: so the Hippocratic treatise, *The Diseases of Women* (1.1).¹⁴ With successive pregnancies, it was believed, their flesh became even more so.¹⁵ The physiological "openness" of women may well underlie Paul's argument in I Corinthians 11 that Christian women must veil their heads to ward off demonic attack, to which they were particularly susceptible.¹⁶ Moreover, ancient medical theories of the "wandering womb"—enshrined in Plato's *Timaeus* (91a6) as well as in the Hippocratic corpus—were summoned up to argue the physiological basis for female instability.¹⁷ That women needed regular sexual intercourse for their good health was a third view popular in the Hippocratic writings.¹⁸

By later antiquity, however, some hypotheses regarding women's alleged mental instability and incapacity had been challenged, although not displaced, by newer medical theories and legal codes. These challenges carried important implications for ascetically-inclined Christian women. Some physicians now questioned whether sexual activity was good for men *or* for women: it might be considered potentially harmful, since (Soranus observed) chaste men and virginal women were healthier than their sexually-active counterparts.¹⁹

¹⁴ See discussion in Lesley Dean-Jones, "The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science," in *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 114; Helen King, "Producing Woman: Hippocratic Gynaecology," in *Women in Ancient Societies: "An Illusion of the Night,"* edd. Leonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, Maria Wyke (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 107.

¹⁵ Ann Ellis Hanson, "Continuity and Change: Three Case Studies in Hippocratic Gynecological Therapy and Theory," in *Women's History*, ed. Pomeroy, p. 86, discussing various treatises of the Hippocratic corpus.

¹⁶ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995), chap. 9. Martin comments, "As is so often the case in ancient ideology, the female represents the primary locus of possible invasion of the social body" (p. 248).

¹⁷ Texts on the "wandering womb" are discussed in Hanson, "Continuity and Change," in *Women's History*, ed. Pomeroy, pp. 81-87.

¹⁸ Women who did not have regular sexual intercourse were more prone to suffering from wandering wombs: *Diseases of Women* 2.127, discussed in Hanson, "Continuity and Change," p. 84. Intercourse kept the womb open and assisted with menstruation: *Diseases of Young Girls* (Littre 8:468-701); *Diseases of Women* 1.2, discussed in Dean-Jones, "The Cultural Construct," p. 121. Soranus knows predecessors and contemporaries who believe that intercourse is necessary for women, but he disagrees: *Gynecology* 1.7.31. Also see Lesley Dean-Jones, "The Politics of Pleasure: Female Sexual Appetite in the Hippocratic Corpus," *Helios* 19 (1992): 72-91, for the argument that Hippocratic gynecology posited the "physiological imperative" of women's bodies to have sexual intercourse, even without desire (pp. 73ff.); women are seen to be "at risk from too little sexual activity" (p. 79).

¹⁹ Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.7.30; 3.12; also see discussion of Soranus and Orbasius (citing Galen) in Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, pp. 200-02. The medical writer Celsus taught that frequent sexual intercourse harms the body, but that infrequent sexual activity stimulates it; as for what counts as frequent or infrequent, Celsus advises that one must consider age, the state of the body, and so forth: *De medicina* 1.1.4. It is striking that Owsei Temkin in *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991),

On this view, women who abstained from sexual relations need not be considered abnormal on *medical* grounds—although they might be deemed *socially* aberrant. Likewise, changes in Roman law accorded women greater legal rights; their ability to initiate divorce, to serve as guardians to their underage children bereft of fathers, and to inherit equally with their brothers, suggest that by the Late Empire, women's legal status was less linked to that of minors and the insane than it had formerly been.²⁰ Ascetic Christian women of the later fourth and fifth centuries benefited from this newer understanding that frequent sexual intercourse was not necessary for female health, as well as from a heightened social recognition of their legal capacities. Moreover, theories of madness that stressed women's greater penetrability by divine agents could, in effect, be turned inside out by advocates of Christian asceticism: God's holy call to renunciation gave divine sanction to ascetic women's seemingly aberrant behavior.

II *Renunciation and Madness*

Accusations of madness in Greek literature often reflect divergent perceptions of reality; in Ruth Padel's words, madness "embodies the question of alternative truth-values in illusion and reality. . . . The mad perceive a different reality from the sane."²¹ Early Christian ascetics could well have endorsed this view: it was not *they* who were mad, but "pagans" who went "mad" over idols, or Christian heretics, such as Arius and his followers, who had gone "insane."²² Christians might also argue that their success as exorcists from the time of Jesus onward showed that he (and they) cast out demons "by the Spirit of God," not because they themselves were overcome by the Prince of Demons (Matt. 12:24-28). Although the Church attempted to institutionalize and thus to control the role of exorcist (only ecclesiastically-designated persons were to rid catechumens of "the devil and his pomps" before baptism),²³

despite devoting a chapter to "Asceticism and Spiritual Medicine," does not mention the changes in attitudes toward the "healthiness" of sexual activity in this later period.

²⁰ See Percy Ellwood Corbett, *The Roman Law of Marriage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930); Jean Gaudemet, "Tendances nouvelles de la législation familiale au IV^e siècle," in Gaudemet, *Transformations et conflits au IV^e siècle ap. J.-C.* Antiquitas 1, 29 (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag, 1978), pp. 187-207; and references in n. 78.

²¹ Padel, "Madness," in *Indigenous Psychologies*, eds. Helas and Lock, pp. 106, 128. The societal definition of madness is stressed by Michael Dols, "Insanity in Byzantine and Islamic Medicine," p. 136.

²² E.g., Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* 1.4, 2.14, 3.16, 6.4; Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 68 ("Ariomaniacs" becomes a favorite designation). For the view that Montanus and the women prophetesses had been driven out of their minds, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.16 (citing the account of Apolinarius of Hierapolis). For Origen's critique of the Pythia as losing her consciousness, see *Contra Celsum* 7.3.

²³ See the Ph.D. dissertation by Elizabeth Leeper, *Exorcism in Early Christianity*, Duke University, 1991.

it failed to contain the numerous ascetics who gained fame as exorcizers in the pages of early Christian literature, curing "raving maniacs" of their demonic afflictions.²⁴

Yet ascetic writers also report that the life of renunciation might itself provoke madness. Very often these writers blame pride in one's ascetic renunciation as a "cause" of the insanity: according to Cyril of Scythopolis, such monks have forgotten Jesus' words, "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).²⁵ Thus the late fourth-century ascetic theorist Evagrius Ponticus posits that the demon of pride produces "wild ravings and hallucinations" in which the monk mistakenly believes that he is the cause of his own virtue.²⁶ The demon of vainglory finds far too easy a prey in monks whose isolation leads to "utter derangement."²⁷ Reporting on Egyptian ascetics, the early fifth-century writer Palladius tells of a monk named Valens who, deluded into thinking that he had seen Christ, claimed that he had no further need for the Eucharist; in this case, the brothers proceeded with a standard medical treatment, putting their deranged colleague in irons for a year.²⁸ Women ascetics, too, knew madness, which in one account led to a false accusation of a sister, with the result that both accuser and accused committed suicide.²⁹

Ascetic writers tend to link such mental instability to two (often related) aspects of the ascetic life: excessive deprivation of food and sleep, and the solitary anchorites' lack of human contact. Such deprivations are often blamed for a renunciant's lapse into "insanity," usually perceived as a temporary aberration for which standard cures stood ready-to-hand. Thus Palladius credits "many ascetic renunciations" for the monk Heron's being "thrown off balance": when he refused to take the Eucharist, his brothers put him in irons.³⁰ Palladius also knows of a monk named Abramius who was so "smitten in mind" that he imagined Christ had appeared to ordain him a

²⁴ See especially Theodoret's *Historia religiosa* 6.4, 9.4, 9.9-10, 13.10-11, 21.14. Theodoret can also contemplate a case in which he ponders whether mental affliction resulted from demonic attack or from brain disease (13.13). Philostorgius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 8.10) reports that Posidonius, a late fourth-century physician, disputed the demonic causation of frenzy, alleging that such diseases were the result of the "bad composition of certain fluids"; see discussion in Temkin, *Hippocrates*, p. 201.

²⁵ Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Theodosii* 17.

²⁶ Evagrius Ponticus, *Practicus* 14.

²⁷ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 58.5.

²⁸ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 25.4-5.

²⁹ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 33.2-4. In *Historia Lausiaca* 34, Palladius reports the tale of a nun who "feigned madness," performing menial kitchen duties at the monastery; through an angelic vision, Abba Piteroum locates her and asks for her blessing, she being pronounced to be more holy than himself. The discovery of this saint in their midst prompts the nuns to exalt her overly, with the result that this "fool" left the monastery, and met an uncertain end. For an interesting meditation on the woman's "folly" as failing to participate in language, see Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique, XVI^e-XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1982), pp. 48-58.

³⁰ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 26.1-2.

priest; the brothers' remedy was to bring him to a "less ascetic and less exacting way of life."³¹ The fifth-century Gallic bishop Faustus of Riez argued for a moderate form of renunciation, since too rigorous ascetic practices could lead to infirmity of mind.³² Living by oneself in the desert or the wilderness tended to lead to hallucinations, as Jerome discovered in his Syrian retreat: although his body was debilitated by his strenuous ascetic renunciation, his mind teemed with images of dancing girls.³³ Jerome soon abandoned his Syrian retreat, preferring the life of books, intellectual conversation, and moderate ascetic discipline to the physical illness and dementia that afflicted him in the wasteland of Syria.³⁴

Thus ascetic writers urge caution regarding the solitaries' life. Just as proud Lucifer in Heaven became unstable, tottering, and "fell," so those who adopt the solitary's life become "easily upset," wavering from side to side as the gales of trouble may drive them.³⁵ Warning that the anchorite's life can prove injurious,³⁶ the fifth-century ascetic writer John Cassian explains that a solitary can become so swept away in contemplation that he forgets to eat.³⁷ The cold and damp cells some hermits inhabit, as well as their excessive fasting, according to Jerome, may also contribute to the impairment of their faculties.³⁸

Women anchorites likewise could be mentally afflicted. In Jerome's view, if even male solitaries are prone to "unclean and godless imaginations," "how much more does it apply to women, whose fickle and vacillating minds, if left to their own devices, soon degenerate?"³⁹ The Pseudo-Athanasian treatise, the *Life of Syncletica*, counsels that if a female anchorite is overwhelmed by "evil thoughts," especially of pride, an appropriate remedy is to place her in a coenobium, a communal monastery, and force her to eat twice a day: she has "fallen into enemy hands . . . on account of excessive ascetic practice."⁴⁰ Solitaries were thus seen as subject to mental instability, against which a coenobium offered protection. Renunciation might require moderation, including the stabilizing force of communal life, in which food, sleep, and the company of like-minded humans were available in at least meagre doses.⁴¹

³¹ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 53.

³² Faustus of Riez, *ep.* 7.

³³ Jerome, *ep.* 22.8.

³⁴ Whether Jerome was really so isolated from urban amenities and books in his Syrian retreat as he suggests in *ep.* 22 has been convincingly questioned by Stefan Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. *Historia* 72 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), esp. pp. 87-98.

³⁵ John Cassian, *Institutiones* 12.4; *Conlationes* 19.10.

³⁶ John Cassian, *Conlationes* 24.8.

³⁷ John Cassian, *Conlationes* 19.4.

³⁸ Jerome, *ep.* 130.17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncleticae* 50.

⁴¹ Vivian Nutton claims that somatic explanations for madness became unusual in later

Despite the recommendation of such homely cures in some ascetic literature, writers urging renunciation walked a fine line between their advocacy of ascetic deprivation and their desire to avoid charges that they were damaging the lives and health of their protégées. Thus Jerome endured the angry whispers of the Roman aristocracy at the funeral of Blesilla, his friend Paula's daughter, who had, apparently, died from excessive ascetic renunciation.⁴² Fasting in particular was a delicate issue: it was necessary to fast, the Fathers believed, in order to drive out the demon of lust⁴³—but how far was “too far”? As Veronika Grimm (echoing Jerome) has recently put it, “While self-starvation in itself was not believed to be of any interest to God, it was, however, the only way to keep one's virginity and this, according to this view, was most pleasing to God.”⁴⁴ Ascetic theorists even calculated the type and amount of food that would lead to the suppression of sexual desire: according to John Cassian, consuming two pieces of bread a day, with a little water as necessary, and reducing sleep to three or four hours a night, should within six months bring the monk to a state of sexual imperviousness.⁴⁵ Young ascetics were warned away from wine altogether, and were counseled to adopt a very limited food intake so as to dampen lust;⁴⁶ on this point, Jerome is fond of quoting a line from Terence's *Eunuchus*, “Where Ceres and Liber fail, Venus droops.”⁴⁷ Indeed, twentieth-century medical studies lend credence to the ascetic theorists' claim that food deprivation leads to a reduction in sexual desire.⁴⁸

Women's fasting would surely have resulted in particular physiological effects as well, such as the cessation of menstruation⁴⁹—a point that apparently

antiquity, as even physicians increasingly adopted the view that demonic possession was its cause: see his essay, “From Galen to Alexander: Aspects of Medicine and Medical Practice in Late Antiquity,” in *Symposium on Byzantine Medicine*, ed. Scarborough, p. 9. It is thus of interest that in the sources I cite, insanity is frequently ascribed to bodily causes.

⁴² Jerome, *ep.* 39.5

⁴³ Evagrius Ponticus, *De diversis malignis cogitationibus* 3.

⁴⁴ Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 194; cf. Jerome's sentiment, *ep.* 22.11.

⁴⁵ John Cassian, *Conlationes* 12.15.

⁴⁶ So Jerome, *ep.* 54.8-10; 22.8; 69.9; 79.7; 52.11.

⁴⁷ Jerome, *ep.* 54.9; *Adversus Iovinianum* 2.7; citing Terence, *Eunuchus* Act 4, line 732 (Loeb, p. 310).

⁴⁸ Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: De la maîtrise du corps à la privation sensorielle II-IV^e siècles de l'ère chrétienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 223, has calculated that what the monks considered a “feast” consisted in about 1069 calories. For a discussion of twentieth-century medical theories regarding food deprivation and sexual desire, see Teresa M. Shaw, *The “Burden of the Flesh”: Fasting and the Female Body in Early Christian Ascetic Theory*. Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1992, pp. 114-18 (forthcoming, Fortress Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ For a contemporary discussion of amenorrhea as a result of undernutrition/starvation, see Angel Keys *et al.*, *The Biology of Human Starvation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950), I: 749-50.

occasioned no alarm to ascetic commentators, whose argument rather claims that moderate fasting is beneficial to health. We learn something of the women's extreme fasting from their male advocates.

Thus the Roman virgin Asella had, according to Jerome, from youth to the time of her death at age fifty eaten only bread and salt, taken with cold water.⁵⁰ Melania the Younger reportedly fasted for five days at a time, eating some moldy bread only on Saturdays and Sundays.⁵¹ Jerome's protégée Blesilla, as mentioned above, starved herself to death in an excess of ascetic enthusiasm.⁵² Women ascetics who lived as these would surely have lost considerable body fat (if they ever had any) and hence probably did not appear very "womanly." Not only were they considered by their admirers as "virile" in mind (a common attribution to women ascetics);⁵³ they also would have had leaner, more "manly" bodies. They were more "like" men, both physically and mentally, than were non-ascetic women.

As suggested above, many problems of a religious, not just of a psychological or a "bodily," nature beset ascetic fasters. The Devil could laud an ascetic's fasting to the degree that the renouncer was quite overcome with pride, a far more serious sin than mere "gluttony" (the monastic designation for customary eating regimes).⁵⁴ Extreme fasting might prompt charges of a "heretical" asceticism that denigrated the good gifts of the Creator, against which I Timothy 4:1-5 had warned, charges which several centuries later the anti-ascetic Christian writer Jovinian leveled against Jerome.⁵⁵ But physical realities also conspired to make extreme fasting religiously counterproductive: ascetics might become so weakened through fasting that they could not carry out their Christian duties. Thus Jerome counsels the regulation of lifelong fasting so that the ascetic can hold out until "the end of the journey," rather than "fall" halfway there.⁵⁶ A story is told in the *Sayings of the Fathers* of a monk who fasten so strenuously (in an effort to forget his wife in "the world") that he was unable even to rise from the ground to greet a visiting monk. The visitor counseled a more moderate regime: eat a little food at the proper times, pray, and turn your anxiety over to the Lord. When the monk followed this advice, his "warfare" ended.⁵⁷

Jerome likewise warns against too avid fasting. He advises Eustochium to

⁵⁰ Jerome, *ep.* 23.3-4.

⁵¹ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 22.

⁵² Jerome, *ep.* 39.1.

⁵³ For example, Melania the Elder as "that female man of God" (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 9.1).

⁵⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncreticae* 49; Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 43; 62.

⁵⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianus* 1.3; 2.16; cf. Jerome, *ep.* 22.13, caricaturing "false virgins" who cry "Manichean!" at those who fast.

⁵⁶ Jerome, *ep.* 107.10.

⁵⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum, Pomeia* 174 (ROC 13 [1908]:66).

restrict her food intake every day, not to deprive herself totally for several days and then "cram."⁵⁸ Small children, such as Paula's granddaughter and namesake, he counsels, should not be pressed into food abstinence too soon. Jerome even concedes that she may have meat—a surprising concession for a little girl destined to become a nun—so that "her feet will not fail her before they begin to run their course."⁵⁹ Ascetics who fell ill were to be given special indulgence in their diet, as both Paula and Basil of Caesarea practiced in their respective monasteries.⁶⁰ Fasting should be *good* for an ascetic's health, as Jerome testifies it was for Asella (who reportedly suffered no digestive problems) and Athanasius, for his hero Anthony (who retained his vigor, and his teeth, until his death at the age of 105).⁶¹

Thus women as well as men could share in the life of ascetic renunciation: they were "virile" women. Despite the fine line walked by ascetics of both sexes to avoid bodily debilitation, pride, heresy accusations, and mental derangement, women fasters won considerable recognition for overcoming the alleged "weakness" and incapacities of their sex: their strength of will and focused resolve was here prominently displayed.

III *Erōs as Madness*

Another theme that Christian ascetics appropriated from classical antiquity and adapted for their own purposes concerned *erōs* as madness.⁶² As noted above, Plato through his mouthpiece of Socrates proclaimed that erotic desire is a form of "divine madness"—indeed, the "best" form. In classical antiquity, *erōs* was deemed not merely an abstract quality, "desire," but a divinity who overpowers his "victim." Tranquillity of the mind could be shattered by his violent attack: thus Sappho writes, "*Erōs* tossed my *phrenes*/as a whirlwind falls on oaks in the mountain."⁶³ *Erōs* was bitter as well as sweet, according to Sappho,⁶⁴ delicious to savor, but destructive of rational functioning.

Associations of disease cling to the notion of *erōs* in Greek literature, and medical writers concur that desire is an illness.⁶⁵ According to physicians

⁵⁸ Jerome, *ep.* 22.17, cf. 22.37; 54.10.

⁵⁹ Jerome, *ep.* 107.8.

⁶⁰ Jerome, *ep.* 108.20; Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 19.

⁶¹ Jerome, *ep.* 23.4; Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 93; 89.

⁶² For a short historical overview, see Massimo Ciavolella, *La "Malattia d'Amore" dall'Antichità al Medioevo* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1976).

⁶³ Sappho, frag. 47V.

⁶⁴ Sappho, frag. 130.

⁶⁵ Plutarch, *Demetrius* 38.4; Archilochus, frag. 245, 249, 266L-B; Sappho, frag. 2; references from and discussion in Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 213; Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.7; 1.9.35. Of late ancient medical writers, both Oribasius and Paulus of Aegina have chapters "On Love"; for a discussion of this theme, and a translation (from Arabic) of a late Alexandrian description

who held to an “imbalance” theory of disease, erotic desire brought changes to the body that had consequent effects upon the mind.⁶⁶

In the earliest Christian text that addresses the issue of sexual desire, I Corinthians 7, Paul fears that the “burning” of desire may prompt immoral relations; he proposes marriage as a “remedy.” Only the Gentiles, from whom Christians should wish to distinguish themselves, would engage in sexual relations “in the passion of desire” (I Thess. 4:3). As Dale Martin argues, marriage for Paul represents a “prophylactic” *against* the “burning” of desire—not an opportunity for its abundant expression.⁶⁷ Developing this understanding of marriage, Clement of Alexandria in the late second century argues that marital relations should ideally be conducted *without* desire,⁶⁸ a notion with which Augustine concurred (at least before he adopted his theory of sexual desire as an ongoing consequence of original sin, and was attacked for this view by his ardent Pelagian opponent, Julian of Eclanum).⁶⁹ Church Fathers nonetheless debated whether marriage nourished the “fire” that might then spill over to illicit sex,⁷⁰ or, alternatively, led to a diminution of sexual desire, dulled through the passing of time, the woman’s fading beauty, and household cares.⁷¹

Christians, like their pagan counterparts, could also understand sexual desire as an “attack” waged by an outside agent. Now, however, the agent is “demonized” in a highly negative direction: there are no “good *daimones*” for Christians.⁷² Yet on this point the Church Fathers’ imagery is not entirely consistent, since sexual “fire” might be seen as part of the created natures God had given us.⁷³ Even the ascetic enthusiast Jerome could teach that desire is implanted in us by God—but adds the ascetic nuance that he means

of “love-sickness,” see Hans H. Biesterfeldt and Dimitri Gutas, “The Malady of Love,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 21-55. Cf. Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, p. 54: “Disease is a staple Greek image for erotic obsession. . . .”

⁶⁶ Galen, *Hygiene* 1.8.

⁶⁷ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 214.

⁶⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.7.57-58.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.26. Julian of Eclanum’s position is undergirded by the medical theory that desire was *necessary* for the concoction of seed; see discussion of Julian’s position, with references, in Elizabeth A. Clark, “Vitiated Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 367-401; also in Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 291-349. Augustine belatedly concedes that there might have been a chaste *libido* in the Garden of Eden, although dissimilar from the raging lust humans experience “post-Fall” (e.g., *ep.* 6*).

⁷⁰ John Cassian, *Conlationes* 22.6; 21.33; cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 8: marriage can be only for the strong, who can resist pleasure.

⁷¹ So John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* 1.

⁷² See, for example, Peter Brown, “Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity: From Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,” in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 137.

⁷³ E.g., John Cassian, *Conlationes* 12.1, cf. 12.8.

desire which “cries out for sexual intercourse,” thus “overstepping its bounds.”⁷⁴ More radically, in the ascetic literature stemming from the Origenist tradition, sexual desire is simply be categorized as *porneia*, the mere contemplation of which leads to mental unrest. Thus, according to Evagrius Ponticus, desire is “contrary to nature” (*para physin*), “nature” signifying the incorporeal mind (*nous*) that constituted our “true,” pre-Fall selves.⁷⁵ As remedies for desire, ascetic writers recommend, in addition to fasting, contemplating death and the punishments of the age to come.⁷⁶ They even cite with approval the tale of the monk who doused his clothes in the decaying corpse of a woman whom he had formerly desired:⁷⁷ this drastic action proved a most effective prophylactic against desire. Ascetically-inclined writers also told inspiring stories of men who had overcome the sickness of lust by making an ascetic commitment (Evagrius Ponticus stands as case-in-point)⁷⁸—or, in another case, of a woman who cured a man’s lust for her by taking up residence in a tomb.⁷⁹

Given the abundant references in ascetic literature to men’s sexual desire and their problems of overcoming it, it is surprising to note how little is reported about women “lusters”: indeed, there is only one female “luster” in all of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the abbess Sarah.⁸⁰ Although Jerome counsels such women as Eustochium and Furia on renunciatory practices that curb lust,⁸¹ there is little that indicates that “lust” was a central problem for most female ascetics. Jerome reports that in Paula’s monastery, when the younger nuns were troubled by “fleshly desires,” Paula cured them with “redoubled fasts.”⁸² Syncletica, as head of a women’s monastery, is reported to warn her virgins that even those who have fled marriage “all their lives” can be led astray by the Devil’s “goad of fornication”; the cure, as elsewhere, involves “pure prayer” and “ascetic practice.”⁸³ Basil of Caesarea describes a virgin’s “fall” into sexual experience in terms of “madness” and “folly,”

⁷⁴ Jerome, *ep.* 54.9.

⁷⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, (Cod. Paris. Graec. 913), 56; for a discussion of the fall of the “minds,” see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 71-74.

⁷⁶ E.g., *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Porneia* 182 (ROC 13 [1908]:271).

⁷⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Porneia* 172 (ROC 13 [1908]:65); the monk is counseled to remind himself, as he smells the decayed remains, “Here is the desire you seek: you have it, be satisfied!”

⁷⁸ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38.9.

⁷⁹ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 5.2.

⁸⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Sara 1: for thirteen years, she fought the demon of fornication (PG 65, 420).

⁸¹ Jerome, *ep.* 22.8; 22.11; 54.8-9.

⁸² Jerome, *ep.* 108.20.

⁸³ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncleticae* 27; 29; the former passages may imply that the women desire each other.

but emphasizes that God and Christ, as good physicians, can offer the appropriate *pharmaka* (remedies)—yet in this case, it is a male author ascribing the “madness” of sexual desire to a woman.⁸⁴

At this juncture, we may usefully recall two points: that Roman law and custom did not emphasize marriage as an arena for the expression of *erōs*; and that when Christian women are portrayed as tempted by marriage, the texts usually stress their (or their parents’) desire for children, not for sexual relations *per se*.

Ancient Roman law and custom (at least among the literate aristocracy) had emphasized the production of children as a central, perhaps *the* central, aim of marriage:⁸⁵ otherwise, why would not concubinage serve just as well? Such a sentiment continued on into the Christian era. When Augustine defended marriage against its overly-ascetic detractors, he named offspring, *proles*, as the first “purpose” of marriage. That the second “end,” *fides*, signaled marriage as a means of sexual control did not, for Augustine, exclude the further connotation of a couple’s faithful companionship in the common enterprises of the household, children, property, and obligations to relatives.⁸⁶

Later Roman law enhanced women’s rights over property and children, and stressed the centrality of the marital relation in the definition of “family” (rather than the wife’s natal kin, as had formerly been the case).⁸⁷ From the late Republic onward, there had developed what Suzanne Dixon calls “the sentimental ideal of the Roman family,” in which affection within marriage was the expected norm; marital *concordia* should go beyond mere “duty.”⁸⁸ Epitaphs, letters, and laudations for deceased wives stress the harmony and the *fides* of the couple.⁸⁹ Marriage, it would appear, was being represented as something more “like” the relation expected by twentieth-century Westerners.⁹⁰ A major difference, however, is that marriage was not in antiquity conceived as a central arena for the expression of *erōs*; for members of the upper classes,

⁸⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *ep.* 46 (Loeb I: 282-310).

⁸⁵ Especially in the Twelve Tables; also recall Augustus’ marriage legislation, one of whose main purposes was to encourage the aristocracy to reproduce.

⁸⁶ Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 24.32.

⁸⁷ See now Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Judith Evans-Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: Constantine’s Legislation on Marriage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Antti Arjava, *Women and Roman Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁸⁸ Suzanne Dixon, “The Sentimental Ideal of the Roman Family,” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 99-113, esp. pp. 99, 103, 113; also see Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁸⁹ Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 83-90; also see Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, chap. 8.

⁹⁰ Dixon, “Sentimental Ideal,” p. 113.

whose writings constitute our evidence, it functioned as part of the system of alliance focused on property relations and inheritance.

Christian expectations regarding marriage in late antiquity do not seem to have differed notably from those of “pagans.” The desire for children remains a prominent feature of the marital expectation. Thus when writing to his friend Pammachius about the death of his wife Paulina (a daughter of Paula), Jerome stresses that Paulina’s “one thought day and night” was that she might first have children—and *then* adopt a life of chastity. Despite her several miscarriages, she did not give up her hope for children (much desired by her husband and her mother-in-law)—although Jerome piously adds that Paulina wanted children so that she might dedicate them to Christian virginity.⁹¹ Likewise, Jerome sarcastically mocks the desire of the young (and childless) aristocratic widow Furia for a remarriage so that she might perpetuate her family line (allegedly descended from the ancient Roman hero Camillus), presenting her father with a little boy to “crawl upon his chest and drool down his neck.”⁹² For a young Christian widow to admit that she wished for remarriage in order to alleviate her sexual “burning” was, in the eyes of ascetic writers, appropriate only for the moral dregs of humanity who possessed no self-control.⁹³

Having banished erotic frenzy from the arena of marriage, however, ascetic writers were happy to recoup it in the relation of the virgin with the Heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus. Sometimes the motif can be given a decidedly Platonic twist, as the Christian version of the quest for Beauty and the Good.⁹⁴ The fifth-century Syrian writer Theodoret of Cyrrhus, for example, stresses that desire can be a “good” when it is directed toward heavenly things.⁹⁵ Unlike human desire, desire for God is not dissipated through satiety.⁹⁶ In the form of Christ, God emits “sparks” that compel and entice ascetic lovers’ desire, so that the latter are “wounded by the sweet darts of love,” “bewitched” by the Bridegroom’s beauty.⁹⁷ The erotic love for God is said to surpass the “madness” of human physical desire in its sharpness and excellence.⁹⁸ Theodoret describes two Syrian women ascetics (who had spent decades in renunciatory practices that included the wearing of irons) as contemplating the beauty of their beloved Bridegroom, depicted as ready to receive them in the heavenly

⁹¹ Jerome, *ep.* 66.3.

⁹² Jerome, *ep.* 54.4.

⁹³ E.g., Ambrose, *De viduis* 2.12; Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.14; John Chrysostom, *De non iterando coniugio* 3.

⁹⁴ Thus Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 10-11.

⁹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* 5.77-79 (SC 57, 251-52).

⁹⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa*, epilogus, 4.

⁹⁷ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa*, epilogus, 19-21.

⁹⁸ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa*, prologus, 5; epilogus, 4.

halls. So “frenzied” with divine love were these women that they did not eat on their way either to or from a Jerusalem pilgrimage, driven “mad” by their yearning for the divine. Theodoret considers them models for other women, although he also implies that he considers their ascetic practices rather extreme.⁹⁹

A second example of the transposition of *erōs* from human to divine love comes in one of John Chrysostom’s treatises against syneisaktism, the practice of ascetic men and women living together in chastity. Ostensibly urging the very women involved in such relationships to abandon their human housemates in expectation of a divine Spouse, Chrysostom assures the women that Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom offers them a love that is “hotter” (*sphodroteros*) than any they could expect from a human husband.¹⁰⁰ Here, the sexual displacement is patent.

A third, and doubtless the most famous, example in early Christian literature of *erōs* transposed occurs in Jerome’s *Epistle* 22 to Eustochium, Paula’s teen-aged daughter who had recently committed herself to lifelong virginity. Congratulating Eustochium and warning her against the perils of ascetic renunciation, Jerome also consoles her for the lack of a human husband: she will enjoy a much more adequate lover in Jesus. Jerome here rather puriently depicts Eustochium and Jesus as the lovers of the Song of Songs. Thus he writes that Eustochium should stay secluded in her room, where her Bridegroom will “sport” with her; there she will find “him whom my soul loves” (Song of Songs 3:4). As Eustochium prepares for sleep, her Bridegroom will “put his hand through the hole of the door,” and her “heart shall be moved for him”; she will rise up and cry, “I am sick with love” (Song of Songs 5:2, 4, 8). If she stays at home rather than roams the streets (where she, like the beloved of the Song of Songs will encounter danger from men), Jesus will come to her and “lie all night between (her) breasts” (Song of Songs 1:14).¹⁰¹ If Eustochium’s “blazing body”—Jerome’s phrase¹⁰² was “cooled” by such talk, I would be very surprised! Bittersweet *erōs* has here been transfigured, its frenzy redirected for a counsel of strict renunciation—but a renunciation that promised divine erotic compensation.

IV *Madness and Economics*

Allegations of madness, although frequently centering on the debilitating results of excessive renunciation or demonic attack, shift to the arena of law

⁹⁹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa* 29.5-7.

¹⁰⁰ John Chrysostom, *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* 12.

¹⁰¹ Jerome, *ep.* 22.24-25.

¹⁰² Jerome, *ep.* 22.8; cf. Patricia Cox Miller, “The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome’s Letter to Eustochium,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993): 21-46.

when issues of the female ascetic's alienation of property and inheritance are concerned. Whereas male writers stress the sexual dimension of ascetic renunciation, the women themselves often encounter more difficulties in the economic arena. Here, we register the fact that several of the women who made the most spectacular renunciations (and hence were much extolled by male authors) were of the Roman aristocracy: in effect, there would have been nothing of particular interest to praise about their renunciations if the latter had *not* been astounding—and hence enormously beneficial to the Church and to the establishment of monastic institutions. Where women's immediate or extended families balked at a possible divestment of the family fortune in favor of the Church, they may have launched legal procedures to declare the women incompetent to handle their own property, thus aligning them with the category of minors and the insane.

In some cases, a wealthy woman turned ascetic might simply capitulate to her family's requests that she not alienate the family property—and trouble would thus be avoided. Jerome, for example, tells of his Roman friend Marcella (who resided in a palace on the Aventine Hill)¹⁰³ that her mother decided to transfer all the family's property from her children to her wealthy brother—thus effectively preventing Marcella from making a massive renunciation of *her* share. According to Jerome, Marcella conceded to her mother's wishes rather than "thwart her parent" and "sadden her mother's heart."¹⁰⁴

In other cases, however, families were more cooperative. Thus when the Anician heiress Demetrias (granddaughter of the tyrannical and fabulously wealthy Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus) abandoned her plan for a forthcoming marriage and opted for a life of perpetual virginity, her widowed (and ascetically-inclined) grandmother and mother allowed her to retain the money they had set apart for her dowry¹⁰⁵—which, judging from our knowledge of family fortunes and dowry size among the Roman aristocracy in this period, could easily be calculated as equivalent to millions of dollars.¹⁰⁶ Whether Demetrias would so easily have escaped from the system of alliance if her father and grandfather had been alive, we cannot predict—but we may imagine not.

Jerome's friend Paula appears to have escaped serious familial accusation upon *her* renunciation, perhaps because she was a widow who had already borne five children, and had generously provided for her minor children before she departed Rome for ascetic retreat in Palestine. According to

¹⁰³ Jerome, *ep.* 47.3.

¹⁰⁴ Jerome, *ep.* 127.4.

¹⁰⁵ Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.

¹⁰⁶ Olympiodorus, frag. 44, in Photius, *Bibliotheca* 80: the highest level of senatorial families had annual incomes of around 4000 pounds of gold; Richard Saller estimates that approximately one year's income was an acceptable dowry for an aristocratic Roman girl ("Roman Dowry and the Devolution of Property in the Principate," *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1984): 101-02).

Jerome's memorial of Paula, she gave these children "all that she had, disinheriting herself upon earth that she might find an inheritance in heaven."¹⁰⁷ In addition to warding off familial accusations, Paula's divestment in favor of her underage children may also help explain why she needed three years to raise money to build her and Jerome's monasteries in Bethlehem.¹⁰⁸

In two cases of aristocratic women renunciants, however, legal or imperial restraints were registered against them when they attempted to divest themselves of property in order to benefit religious and monastic causes: they were deemed legally "incapable" of managing their property and hence were assimilated to the category of minors and the insane. These two were Olympias of Constantinople and Melania the Younger.

Olympias, granddaughter of the praetorian prefect of Constantinople under Constantine, was early left an orphan. Probably when still a teen-ager, she was married to Nebridius, prefect of Constantinople.¹⁰⁹ According to her *Vita* and to Palladius, her marriage lasted "only a few days"—in any event, less than a year—before Nebridius died.¹¹⁰ Olympias refused remarriage, claiming that the advice in I Timothy 5:14 that younger widows remarry was countermanded by I Timothy 1:9, that "the Law was not laid down for the righteous man, but for the unruly, the impure, and the insatiable"—qualities that *she* did not exhibit. Her *Vita* then reports that through "a certain demonic jealousy," Olympias was falsely accused to the Emperor, Theodosius I, of squandering her property. Theodosius intervened, attempting to force the young and vastly wealthy widow into marriage with one of his own Spanish relatives. When Olympias refused the marriage, Theodosius deemed that she was indeed incapable of handling her finances and commanded the city prefect to assume guardianship of her property until she reached the age of thirty. Encouraged by her spurned suitor, the city prefect harassed her by keeping her under house arrest, thus hoping to break her ascetic resolve. In about 391, returning to Constantinople after his battle against Maximus, Theodosius relented and allowed her the control of her property. According to her *Vita*, she then gave to the Church of Constantinople

ten thousand pounds of gold, twenty thousand of silver, and all of her real estate situated in the provinces of Thrace, Galatia, Cappadocia Prima, and Bithynia; and more, the houses belonging to her in the capital city, the one situated near the most holy cathedral, which is called "the house of Olympias";

¹⁰⁷ Jerome, *ep.* 108.6.

¹⁰⁸ Jerome, *ep.* 108.14.

¹⁰⁹ A.H.M. Jones, "The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity," in *Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 29; *Vita Olympiadis* 2.

¹¹⁰ *Vita Olympiadis* 2; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 56.

together with the house of the tribune, complete with baths, and all the buildings near it; a mill; and a house which belonged to her in which she lived near the public baths of Constantinople; and another house of hers which was called "the house of Evander"; as well as all of her suburban properties.¹¹¹

She also built and maintained a monastery for 250 women,¹¹² and provided "all the expenses" for bishop John Chrysostom, up to the end of his life in exile.¹¹³ Was Olympias' asceticism a sign of "demonic insanity"—or of "holy sanity"?

The case of Melania the Younger is equally interesting. Here, details provided by her *Vita* can be supplemented by historians' accounts pertaining to the Gothic attack on, and sack of, Rome between 408 and 410. Offspring of the aristocratic clans of the Antonii, the Valerii, and the Ceionii Rufii,¹¹⁴ Melania the Younger was married when she was around fourteen to a cousin—a move that seems calculated to consolidate the family's vast wealth and property.¹¹⁵ Her young husband Pinianus at first refused her request that they live in sexual abstinence, but acceded after the deaths of their two young children.¹¹⁶ The couple's parents were clearly disturbed at this turn of events and tried to force them back into a more "worldly" life; it appears that the parents were subject to recriminations from their aristocratic peers (more darkly dubbed "the schemes of the Enemy" by the author of her *Vita*).¹¹⁷ Upon his deathbed, Melania's father relented and gave his blessing for their ascetic divestment.¹¹⁸ Their charities now began in earnest, as they dispersed their wealth to the poor, to prisoners, exiles, and those condemned to the mines.¹¹⁹

When, however, they wished to divest themselves of their slaves, they encountered family resistance. This divestment was no small enterprise: Palladius reports that Melania freed 8000 of her slaves who wished for freedom.¹²⁰ Pinian's brother Severus ("spurred by the Devil," according to the *Vita*) intervened to gain possession of the slaves, rather than having them sold on the open market. That the slaves on Melania's and Pinian's suburban

¹¹¹ *Vita Olympiadis* 3-5.

¹¹² *Vita Olympiadis* 6.

¹¹³ *Vita Olympiadis* 8.

¹¹⁴ See Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), pp. 83-85 for discussion of Melania's ancestry.

¹¹⁵ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 1; Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, p. 85.

¹¹⁶ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 1; 4-6.

¹¹⁷ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 6.

¹¹⁸ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 7.

¹¹⁹ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 9.

¹²⁰ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 61. John Chrysostom reports that a man who owned between one and two thousand slaves was rich: *Homily 63 in Matt.* 4.

estates were rising in rebellion was a related event troubling to the young couple.¹²¹

Judging the time to be ripe for drastic action, the couple appealed to Serena, the wife of Stilicho, and Serena intervened with the Western emperor, Honorius, to assist them with their divestment and to ward off the attacks of their relatives. Honorius allegedly issued decrees in the provinces in which the couple owned property that governors and other officials should undertake the sale of the property and remit the profits to Melania and Pinian.¹²² The property, it should be mentioned, was in addition to the annual income of one of the couple, namely, 120,000 "pieces of gold" (probably gold *solidi* equivalent to 1666 pounds of gold: about 123 million dollars, or, in a method of calculation some favor, enough to provide for around 29,000 people a year at subsistence level).¹²³ Their Roman mansion was so grandly magnificent that they were not able to sell it—not even to Serena—before the Gothic invasion.¹²⁴

Melania and Pinian's temptations and tribulations were not, then, so much sexual as economic. It is with money, not with erotic desire, that the Devil tempts them. Satan rudely hints that they were cravenly attempting to "buy" the Kingdom of Heaven through their charities, and urges them to keep at the least their spectacular villa by the sea, an estate that Melania's biographer claims produced "inestimable income."¹²⁵

A second attempt to halt the couple's renunciations by depriving them of their property occurred in the context of Alaric's assault on Rome that began in C.E. 408. The historian Zosimus reports that the Senate needed to raise four thousand pounds of gold to satisfy Alaric's initial demands alone.¹²⁶ The city prefect, in collaboration with the Senate, attempted to confiscate Melania and Pinian's property for the imperial treasury. According to the pious author of Melania's *Vita*, "God's providence" intervened: the populace murdered the prefect during a bread shortage, and Melania and Pinian's goods were saved.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 10.

¹²² Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 11-12; the *Vita* mentions property in six provinces (Spain, Africa, Mauretania, Britain, and Numidia, in addition to their Italian holdings); Palladius adds two more (Aquitania and Gaul; *Historia Lausiaca* 61).

¹²³ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 15; the Greek version of the *Vita* ascribes the amount to Pinian; the Latin version, to Melania.

¹²⁴ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 14. Archeological confirmation is suggested by the excavation of a mansion on the Coelian Hill with tablets indicating that it belonged to the Valerii; see Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, pp. 97-99 for details and references to archeological reports on the excavation.

¹²⁵ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 17-18.

¹²⁶ Zosimus 5.29. According to Zosimus (5.40), Alaric next demanded all the city's gold, silver, moveable goods, and barbarian slaves. Alaric finally lowered his demands (Zosimus 5.41).

¹²⁷ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 19.

Some points of Roman law, in addition to historians' accounts of the Gothic siege of Rome, here lend interpretive assistance. Neither Pinian nor Melania had reached their legal majority (age 25) when they began their divestments.¹²⁸ Minors who wished to sell their property had to apply for a special legal dispensation, a *venia aetatis*.¹²⁹ Yet even with such a document in possession, a minor might be prevented by relatives insisting that a guardian be appointed for him or her if they could prove that the young person was given to prodigality or suffered mental derangement¹³⁰—as Melania's and Pinian's relatives might well have claimed. Thus when the *Vita* represents the relatives as attempting to prevent the alienation of the family property by seemingly wayward minors, they were within their legal rights to do so.

Moreover, the incident regarding the city prefect mentioned above raises another interesting possibility: since Melania and Pinian would have had to apply to the city prefect to obtain the *venia aetatis* enabling them to sell their property,¹³¹ this official may have become aware of their interest in divestment—and have judged that their property would prove useful in the city's attempt to “buy off” Alaric. By 409, both Serena and Stilicho, who had earlier befriended the young couple, had been executed on suspicion of treason and hence were not available to provide protection.¹³² Did Melania and Pinian's relation with the now-discredited Serena raise sufficient misgivings that a charge might have been brought against them?—otherwise, it is difficult to understand how the State could legally confiscate their property, even in a situation of emergency.¹³³ That there was at this time a wholesale desertion of slaves from Rome to the Goths during Alaric's attack (Zosimus claims 40,000) lends historical credence to the fear expressed by Melania and Pinian that slaves on their suburban properties would rebel.¹³⁴

Thus to their relatives, as well as to “pagan” officials, Melania and Pinian may well have appeared to be behaving “prodigally” and “insanely.” To Melania herself, as represented by her pious biographer, her alleged “insanity”—manifest in her “mad” urge for economic deprivation—was the result of her having been “wounded by the divine love” in her earliest youth.¹³⁵ Her “madness” was not “mental illness” but a divine calling. *Erōs* had driven her “mad”—but the *erōs* was of God.

¹²⁸ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 8.

¹²⁹ *Codex Theodosianus* 2.17.1; *Codex Justinianus* 2.44(45), 1-2; men could apply at twenty and women at eighteen.

¹³⁰ *Iustiniani Digesta* 27.10.1, 3 (on prodigality and dementia).

¹³¹ People of senatorial rank had to apply through the city prefect: *Codex Theodosianus* 2.17.1-2.

¹³² Zosimus 5.33-34, 38.

¹³³ Alexander Demandt and Guntram Brummer, “Der Prozess gegen Serena im Jahre 408 n. Chr.,” *Historia* 26 (1977): 492-93, citing *Codex Iustiniani* 10.1.5.

¹³⁴ Zosimus 5.42.

¹³⁵ Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 1.

IV *Sōphrosynē and Shifting Cultural Values*

The shift of cultural values between the time of Aristotle and that of fourth and fifth-century Christian ascetics may be variously plotted. One instructive exercise is to note the changed meaning of *sōphrosynē*. For Aristotle, as noted above, men's and women's *sōphrosynē* differed in that women lacked the strength of the male's deliberative faculty.¹³⁶ In texts from Aristotle's era and later, the *sōphrosynē* of women is said to consist in their loving and honoring their husbands, living obediently and harmoniously with them; their sexual conduct should be chaste, interpreted as meaning that they did not commit adultery.¹³⁷ Musonius Rufus, a philosopher of the Imperial period, concerned to stress the similarity in virtue of the two sexes, teaches that the quality of *sōphrosynē* is the same for both—namely, both are to be chaste in marriage.¹³⁸

In the hands of Christian ascetic writers such as Jerome, however, the virtue of *sōphrosynē* met quite a different fate. When translating the recommendation of the Pastoral Epistles (I Tim. 2:15, 3:2, Tit. 1:8, 2:2) that matrons, married bishops, and "old men" all exhibit *sōphrosynē*, Jerome brazenly offers *castitas* as the Latin equivalent, which he interprets as "no sex," best exemplified in lifelong virginity, or secondarily in abstinent widowhood. He argues that married women can demonstrate *castitas* only if they bear children who will remain virgins, thus making up for their mother's "loss and decay" as married women who engaged in sexual intercourse.¹³⁹ Likewise, according to Jerome, bishops must exhibit *sōphrosynē*, that is, sexual abstinence, during their terms of office.¹⁴⁰

One connotation of *sōphrosynē*, however, remained the same: it signaled the opposite of madness. Against the frenzy and insanity of those consumed with worldly affairs and sexual desire, the *sōphrosynē* of the abstinent Christian connoted mental control—a control equally available to *both* sexes, for, as Jerome argued, "souls have no sex."¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* 1259b-1260a.

¹³⁷ See texts and discussion in Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, pp. 187, 194-96.

¹³⁸ Musonius Rufus, frag. 4, discussed in Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, p. 221.

¹³⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.27.

¹⁴⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.34-35.

¹⁴¹ Jerome, *ep.* 122.4.